

# David Ross Brower

**'We don't want to pay for the destruction of the Earth ourselves, we want to just put it on American Express or Visa, and leave the bill to the kids.'**

BY DAVID KUPFER

**H**is life has been exceptional, inspiring, exciting, turbulent on occasion, and even a little crazy. In his own crusading manner, he has built a fire under the environmental community and kept it stoked for decades. By both his example and his spirit, he is constantly reminding us that "boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."

David Ross Brower grew up in the hills of Berkeley when there still was an unobstructed view of the Golden Gate. He dropped out of the University of California in 1931. He became a mountaineer, making seventy first-ascents in Yosemite and the High Sierra. Much as he would do in the world of environmental politics later in his life, he found nineteen new routes on the sheer granite walls of Yosemite. He was an instructor in the U.S. Mountain Troops, served as a combat-intelligence officer in the Italian campaigns of World War II, and was awarded the Bronze Star. He and his wife Anne live in the home they built forty-seven years ago, overlooking the Bay Area, where they raised their four children.

For more than sixty years he has been working on a campaign in behalf of the planet, its wild places and inhabitants. A member of the Sierra Club since 1933, Brower has had a trailblazing career as a radical in the conservation movement. As an editor, filmmaker, and writer for the Club, he helped establish a broader environmental awareness in the nation. As the Club's first executive director, he transformed it from a regional into a national force in the 1950s and 1960s, seeing its membership surge from 2,000 to 77,000. He led successful campaigns to protect Dinosaur National Monument and prevent the Grand Canyon from being dammed, and helped add nine areas to the National Park system and establish the National Wilderness Preservation System. He was the instigator of the Sierra Club Foundation, Friends of the Earth International (now in more than fifty countries), the League of Conservation Voters, Environmental Liaison Center International (Nairobi), and Earth Island Institute.

The Institute, founded in 1982 with the goal of adding ecological consciousness to all spheres of human activity, supports a number of small but potent grass-roots campaigns. Brower serves as chairman of the organization's board. Its headquarters are at 300 Broadway, Suite 28, San Francisco, CA 94133. Phone: (415)788-3666.

*Northern California writer David Kupfer, branded an environmental "hyperactivist" by David Brower more than a dozen years ago, also works as an environmental consultant for Hollywood studios. His interview with Paul Krassner appeared in the November 1993 issue of The Progressive.*

Brower's commitment to his cause is unswerving. At 81, he maintains a wicked travel schedule, and has the passion and energy of someone half his age. He's pushed and challenged the norm of what is possible on the political battlefield, and has an uncompromising dedication to his cause. He's twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The two volumes of his recent autobiography are titled *For Earth's Sake* and *Work in Progress*.

Amory Lovins calls him the greatest living conservationist, our generation's Thoreau or Emerson. "Throughout his career, he's kept ten years ahead of everyone else," says Lovins. Futurist Hazel Henderson recently remarked, "David Brower is quite simply a unique figure in the environmental movement. I marvel at his bedrock integrity and clarity of vision and purpose."

I sat down with Brower on a sunny afternoon in late March at his Earth Island Institute office. Surrounded by stones and lichens collected on his travels around the world, he provided impassioned answers to my questions.

**Q:** Where do you get your inspiration?

**David Brower:** I think I derive my inspiration from having been a sophomore dropout from college. My wife, who graduated with a BA, thinks I've had some success because I didn't know it was impossible. I hadn't been educated to know what you couldn't do.

I like the observation that you can't put kids in a concrete box for twelve years and expect them to come out educated. That is what we are doing. We are finding various elaborate ways to stifle creativity, and we sure need creativity these days.

**Q:** What sort of role models have you had for the nonconformist life you've led?

**Brower:** I don't know anyone who follows a conformist life who can claim to be anything but mediocre. That is what average is. John Muir was one of my role models. I never met him; I was two when he died. We didn't have any conversations. I've read a lot of his material, and although some of it would be considered overwritten, it certainly moved me. Moved me into the Sierra.

I learned a lot from Aldo Leopold, whom I never met. I did meet Ansel Adams, whom I knew for fifty years and learned a lot from. And Howard Zahniser, who was executive secretary of the Wilderness Society. He was the last person I know of in the



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environmental leadership who had the ability to glue the organizations together instead of them fighting over turf and becoming fragmented.

**Q:** What sort of report card would you give President Bill Clinton regarding the environment?

**Brower:** The Earth Island report card on President Clinton is not very good, and my wife's is possibly even a little rougher. I've been married for fifty years so I'd better quote my wife. She said Clinton campaigned very hard, got into the Oval Office, perceived the power of corporations, and threw in the towel. That's not a very good grade.

Three-time governor of Colorado Dick Lamm said politicians are weather vanes in a world that needs compasses, so if we're going to grade somebody, why don't we grade ourselves on this: What have we done to sell compasses or at least make a big wind so that the weather vane would go the right way. People in politics want to know how a thing is going to play, and if it doesn't play very well, they don't try it.

**Q:** How would you grade the environmental movement?

**Brower:** I'd grade the environmental movement with a C-minus or a D at this point. One reason is that too many of the organizations are tax-deductible and have no non-tax-deductible arm. If you are tax-deductible, you have limitations on your lobbying activity and prohibitions on your political activity. If you want to lobby successfully, you'd better get the right people into office. If you want to avoid that arena, you can't be complaining about what happens in it. That's what most of the environmental movement is doing.

The Sierra Club, fortunately, is not tax-deductible. In campaigning to save the Grand Canyon, I helped them lose their tax-deductible status. That was a very big improvement. However, even the Sierra Club needs to get its nerve back. So I'm giving all of them rather low grades because they are not bold enough, and this planet is a beautiful-enough place to be bold about it when you want to protect it.

**Q:** Why do you think the environmental movement is frequently portrayed as confused or contradictory on critical issues?

**Brower:** The environmental movement *is* confused as is everybody else. Our religions are confused, our Government is confused, our corporations are confused. Confusion reigns. Part of the confusion is that they are too much indentured to corporate thinking. A lot of the funds come from corporations. A lot of the information goes out from media that are controlled by corporations and influenced by corporate advertisers.

Right now, the problem of the corporation is that it is given

the rights of a person without conscience. Somehow, we've got to build conscience back into the corporate structure, and that's one of the most important tasks. Corporations have the organizational ability, they have the money, they have the political power. They've got to realize—and we're trying to help them realize—that there will be no corporations, no stockholders, no profits, no anything on a dead planet. They should stop trying to kill it. You can make money going the other way, trying to put the life-support system back together. There is money to be made, briefly, in expending natural capital; there is money to be made, sustainably, in restoring it.

**Q:** So have you been heartened by the socially and environmentally responsible business trend typified by such firms as Patagonia, Ben & Jerry's, Smith & Hawken, and Esprit?

**Brower:** I am heartened by these general moves and some of the smaller corporations. But that is just small change compared to what the major transnationals and the *Fortune* 500 are spending going the wrong way. There are some exceptions. I hope there can be many more exceptions. Right now I'm tempted to publish a book, *The Misfortune 500*, and have the bad ones up front and the good ones that are making the changes in the back, and see if we can't move everybody to the back.

**Q:** What is your sense of the strength of the environmental movement today?

**Brower:** It has grown greatly in numbers. There is political potential, political clout there, but they are not using it. The numbers are there, but we need to inform members more often. Most of the big groups don't have anything more frequent than a bimonthly publication. We all ought to join together in having an environmental weekly, and that's just a conservative approach. It really should be an environmental daily. Maybe twice a day. But I'll compromise on a weekly.

**Q:** How about an ongoing, electronic forum?

**Brower:** I worry what others worry about the electronic superhighway—that this widens the gap between those who have the equipment to use it and those who don't. We'll probably have ten or twenty million people who can use it and five billion who can't. That worries me.

**Q:** What is the greatest weakness of the environmental movement in the United States?

**Brower:** The activists are too much involved in turf and ego. Of course, that's a problem that can be found in lots of places outside of the environmental movement. Justice William O. Douglas once said to President Franklin Roosevelt that any Government bureau that is more than ten years old should be abolished, because after ten years the bureau is more concerned with its image than with its mission. That can happen anywhere, and you have to watch for it all the time.

**Q:** What are your thoughts on the professionalization of the environmental movement?

**Brower:** It's nice to have professionals and technical experts and people who have good facts, but the Brower definition of a fact is a fragment of information isolated from context, and context is what is important. We will never get context fully understood, but we should think more about how things are in the whole. That's what the deep-ecology movement is trying to do. Remember the Robinson Jeffers line in his poem, "The Answer": "A severed hand is an ugly thing. The greatest beauty is organic wholeness. The divine beauty of the universe. Love that, not man apart from that."

He wrote that fifty or sixty years ago, before Arnold Naess invented the deep-ecology movement. That's what the deep-ecology movement is all about, and what we should be all about. We homo sapiens are recent arrivals on this planet, and we should have just a little bit of humility. That seems to be one of our great shortages. We're heavy on hubris.

**Q:** Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

**Brower:** I'd like to consider myself a spiritual person, but I'm a dropout Presbyterian, a dropout Baptist. I have given sermons at various churches and twice at the Cathedral of Saint John the

Divine in New York City. I learned something from Father Thomas Berry not too long ago, when he said we should put the Bible on the shelf for twenty years and read the Earth. Learn more about it—among other things, what not to do anymore. I think that is extraordinarily important advice. There is an awful lot to read out there that the Bible doesn't know how to interpret yet.

I think religion is terribly important. You've got to have faith and you've got to have spiritual consistency. You have to have things that are sacred. You must remember that the Bible was written when the population of the Earth was about fifty million people. When Christ was born, there was a population of around 250 million. It was a completely different ball game then. We've got to think what is needed to guide 5.6 billion humans—a good many of them, but not nearly the majority, with a very happy, healthy appetite for resources. The church needs to think more about that.

I'm glad that just a few years ago the Catholic Church began to put the word stewardship into its vocabulary. I think I could make some suggestions for some other words they should put in their vocabulary, considering where the Earth is headed.

**Q:** Such as?

**Brower:** We've got to do something about the number of people on the Earth and the number of overconsumers in the industrial world. We've got to talk about both of those things at the same time. The people in the developing world—too much of the time the population growth rate is still horrendous, unacceptable—are doing themselves in almost as fast as we tried to do them in by ransacking their resources for our own convenience and comfort.

Back to spirit, we need it.

**Q:** What do you think about the Gaian philosophy as the spiritual backbone of people's consciousness?

**Brower:** The Gaian philosophy includes the idea that the Earth will get by and take care of itself, whether we are here or not. I'm anxious to have us stay here, and I'm quite fearful that we have the capability of taking everything else with us if we leave. I like to suggest that Venus was a nice place to visit until they had a Reagan/Bush Administration that wanted to study global warming longer. The temperatures on Venus are 800 degrees and there is no life there.

**Q:** What impact do you think women have on the environmental movement in the United States?

**Brower:** Women's role in the movement is terribly important. I'm glad to say that two of the presidents of the Earth Island Institute have been women. I am sorry to say that Margaret Mead left us so soon, at a mere seventy-five. I want Vandana Shiva to be president of the world. Wangari Maathai could be vice president.

There are some extremely effective women in the movement. One of my heroines is economist Hazel Henderson, who says, "Economics is a form of brain damage." I put that in a full-page ad in *The New York Times*.

**Q:** Who on the scene impresses you?

**Brower:** I'm impressed by Amory Lovins. He uses numbers in ways that drive the bean-counters up the wall and out of their obsolete thinking. He's an unmitigated genius. I was one of the people who helped him to decide not to finish at Oxford, rather to work for Friends of the Earth, and now he's doing extraordinary work for the Rocky Mountain Institute. This one guy has changed the world's thinking about energy.

**Q:** What do you think about the notion of sustainable development?

**Brower:** I've said before that sustainable development is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. But sustainable growth is also an oxymoron. We can't have a constantly growing economy. It can't happen on a limited Earth. The sooner we realize that, the better off we will be. We didn't get into this addiction to exponential and constant growth until fairly recently. I'd like to know the date. Maybe the industrial revolution got it started

and the end of World War II gave it a jet assist. The Earth can't afford it.

The gross national product measures nothing important except gross stuff. It was started, they say, by the Russians. The United States wanted no one to have a grosser national product and entered the race. We haven't got off of that. Our leaders are still looking at getting the economy growing again. Any politician coming out against a growing economy would probably be thrown out of office.

One of the things we are doing now is getting so chintzy, we don't want to pay for the destruction of the Earth ourselves, we want to just put it on American Express or Visa and leave the bill to the kids. I think that is a form of stealing from children. I think that should be illegal. We need a compulsory investment in restoration, and a guaranteed gain from investment, making it attractive. That's not too radical. Taxes are a compulsory investment. Their guaranteed gain is not yet up to what we need. But remember, people bought war bonds. We have a different kind of war now. We don't have that much time to fight this war against our greedlock. That's the enemy, and Rush Limbaugh is its patron saint.

**Q:** Do you think we need laws to protect endangered cultures?

**Brower:** Absolutely. These endangered cultures know through oral tradition something we'll never find out with our specialized way of trying to separate everything to measure it and find out what to do about it. There's a wealth of knowledge that we would have, too, if we had read the Earth as well as they do, because that's all they read. If we had not gone into the business of cutting down half our forests to make pulp, filling half our landfills with paper, and if we used the oral tradition instead of Gutenberg's product to spread the word, we'd know what they know. The oral tradition is very environmentally gentle.

**Q:** Tell me about Earth Island Institute.

**Brower:** Earth Island Institute was founded in 1982, and one of the main goals of the organization is to forward the ideas of creative individuals and to provide an umbrella for a number of innovative projects. The International Marine Mammal Project has been quite successful through its tuna boycott campaign, and recently launched a major campaign against Norway's return to commercial whaling. Our award-winning quarterly, *Earth Island Journal*, is about to be the first magazine ever published on 100 per cent tree-free paper, paper produced from kenaf, which is derived from plant fiber.

We have some thirty different projects, projects like our Urban Habitat Program, which is working to cultivate multicultural urban leadership. Our Endangered Species Project assists new campaigns to protect endangered species and habitats. Yosemite Guardian works to protect that national park's ecosystems from threats. The Sacred Land Film Project has produced films about the environmental effects of energy and resource-development in the West. Earth Island Press recently produced two books, *The Case Against Free Trade* and *Clearcut*. Rainforest Action Network started out with us. One of our current projects I'm very excited about is a Global Restoration Fair we're planning for 1995 at the Presidio here in San Francisco to help promote restoration and action in all the places we can plant that seed. And we need to celebrate. It will be a festival of renewal.

**Q:** What are you doing for fun?

**Brower:** What is quite fun is going around on the student circuit and getting young people fired up.

**Q:** Do you consider yourself a radical?

**Brower:** I do by the definition of radical that you'll find in the dictionary, but not by the connotation of radical popularly picked up by the media, that radical is bad. Radical should be good. Radical has something to do with roots. I believe in roots, good roots. Roots are always going on beyond, they're not stuck where they are.

**Q:** What words most accurately describe you?

**Brower:** The Great Procrastinator. My secret to success is

never to count the things I haven't done, just to count the things I have. The things I haven't done would make a long, depressing list. The things I've done make a fairly short list.

I remind myself that no success is a permanent success. Environmentalists can't win. Only the wreckers can win. When they wreck something, it's pretty hard to get it back. It would be very hard to get back Glen Canyon. We're going to try to get back Hetch Hetchy Valley. Just watch.

My credo, abbreviated, goes as follows: There is only one ocean, though its coves have many names. A single sea of atmosphere with no coves at all. The miracle of soil, alive and giving life, lying thin on the only planet for which there is no spare. We need a renewed stirring of love for the Earth.

That's my business.

**Q:** Do you have any regrets?

**Brower:** Of course. I have a recurrent dream that I'm back in college, and not getting anything done. My greatest environmental regret is Glen Canyon Dam, because I still have the feeling that if I'd stuck with it, I was in a position to block it, and didn't.

**Q:** Are you an optimist by nature?

**Brower:** I have to be an optimist. Everybody should be, because being a pessimist gives you no alternative except martinis. I don't mean to kick martinis. I'd rather be an optimist because there's got to be hope.

**Q:** From where do you derive your hope?

**Brower:** It helps you avoid burnout if you have at least one consecutive success. I've had maybe more than one—at least a temporary success, but not enough for one lifetime.

The sites for dams in the Grand Canyon are still there, and if we somehow let our guard down, there will always be people who would like to pour the concrete. It's a matter of encouraging generation after generation to keep the guard up.

We can do that. ■

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